DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 769 CS 004 914

AUTHOR Empacher, Marjorie, R. P.
TITLE A Case Study Using Oral History in the Analysis of Factors Contributing to Illiteracy.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 19p.; Research prepared at Boston University

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; *Educational Disadvantagement; Educational Needs; *Educational Problems; Elementary Secondary Education; Emotional Problems; *Failure Factors; *Illiteracy; *Illiterate Adults; Oral History; Psychological Patterns; Reading Difficulty; *Reading Failure; Reading Instruction; Remedial Instruction; Tutoring

ABSTRACT

An analysis of the problems of an illiterate woman who learned to read as an adult, based on oral history techniques supplemented by information from teachers, family, and friends, is presented in this paper. An account of the woman's life is first presented to show her complete inability to read or write through ten years of schooling, the tutoring methods that finally enabled her to learn to read, her attempts to understand and integrate her life, the problems that led to a mental breakdown, and her subsequent rise to a position of mental health and functional literacy. The woman's life story, as told in her oral history, is then presented to answer a number of questions about her memories of her early reading instruction, her self-concept, and her family's attitudes, as well as about the impact of her illiteracy upon her social life, job possibilities, and attitudes toward her own child. It is concluded that the oral history demonstrates how an intelligent person can be beaten down to accepting a position out of the mainstream of society, as well as showing the psychological impact of reading disability. The paper outlines the causes of the woman's illiteracy as perceptual weakness, lack of educational quality, and the low social position of her family. It concludes that society has a social and moral responsibility to eradicate illiteracy through a concentration on reading treatment and improved teacher education. (GT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED173769

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

A CASE STUDY USING ORAL HISTORY IN THE ANALYSIS OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ILLITERACY

Marjorie R.P. Empacher

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Marjorie R.P. Empacher
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PURPOSE

Illiteracy in our society today has become a problem of concern on all levels of government and citizen awareness. Federal, state and local governments are seeking ways to improve educational opportunity for all people and to wipe out existing adult illiteracy. The media makes us aware that this is a problem reaching the broad spectrum of society; yet the solutions are illusive.

The psychological and social aspects of reading disability augment the problem in this very literate society of ours. Psychological factors are almost always instrumental in both the causation of reading disability and the ramifications of initial learning disability in reading. Once an individual is out of elementary school and illiterate, the social factors are crushing on any level of our society. We obviously need more understanding in order to solve this immense problem.

It was the purpose of this study, through an in depth analysis of a single illiterate adult, to gain insights into the social and psychological aspects of illiteracy in the course of a life. What factors accumulate to prevent a child from learning to read in the introductory stages? How can this continue through ten or

CS004914

more years of schooling? What are the effects of illiteracy as an individual tries to become an independent adult?

A woman who has learned to read as an adult but who was unable to learn even the basics through the tenth grade in a public school system in Michigan in the 1950s and 60s is our subject.

The technique was oral history. She was willing to tape her story for posterity. Her aims were to better understand her past and to help prevent the problem for children to come.

Through the technique of oral history we come as close as possible to the experience of becoming illiterate and existing in the 60s and 70s as an illiterate adult in the United States. Tapes were made of her recollections, transcribed and edited for the body of this dissertation. Her story, told in her own words, gives us insights simultaneously into her linguistic and cognitive functioning along with her factual and affective experiences.

To corroborate her story and to gather further substantive information, letters were requested and a trip to her family, friends and educators was made. Records were obtained and interviews were recorded. The combination of selected oral history, school records, and field notes provide as complete a case study as possible of an emerging adult illiterate.

Perhaps if teachers and other educators were thoroughly aware of the psychological and social aspects of reading disability, without blame attached, the problem could be ameliorated. At the present time labeling (i.e. disadvantaged, dyslexic, learning disabled) often encourages a teacher to blame rather than teach or find someone else to teach. Regardless of cause or combination of causes everyone can learn to read to some degree and any degree is

better than none. The schools must take the responsibility to see that every person in the United States of America is taught to read to the best of his/her various abilities regardless of internal or outside inhibiting factors. In depth understanding of how home, community and school combine to create the reading disabled child and thereby the illiterate adult, might help to cure a national problem. It is a microcosm view of a machrocosm problem.

BACKGROUND

The subject of this study is Edith. She was born out of wedlock in 1945, in a rural area of Michigan. Her total family is white, fundamentalist Protestant. When she was a baby her mother married and moved with her new husband, then a crop-picker, to southern Ohio. They subsequently had eight children. When Edith was of school age they moved permanently back to their larger families in Michigan where she attended public school through the ninth grade. She never learned to read or write; repeated 2nd grade, but never had any special assistance; and was in "special class" for the seventh and eighth grades. She sought out remedial assistance after she dropped out of school and was working in a small city, but discontinued this private tutoring after a few months when her personal life did not allow the time.

She began working with her present tutor in May of 1971. At that time she was 26, married, illiterate, obese, had a severe case of colitis, and was cooped up all day in a tiny three room apartment with a rambunctious two year old. She was committed to

answering the telephone for her husband's new cleaning business, but because of total illiteracy was unable to take messages with any degree of efficiency. She could only write numbers and was too insecure to ask anyone to repeat or clarify any part of the message. His whole business operated out of a truck and depended on her for all contacts.

The referral for tutoring came originally from her minister, a young man involved with his parishoners who had a wife taking courses in Special Education. They sought out a clinical psychologist they knew who in turn referred Edith to an experienced Reading Specialist at the local college for tutoring. When the tutor first called Edith, an appointment was made for a diagnostic work-up, and a fee of ten dollars an hour was agreed upon. Within a few days Edith called back to cancel the appointment. The tutor sensed the problem and persuaded Edith to keep the apppointment on two conditions: the sessions would be five dollars an hour, once a week; and the tutoring would teach Edith to read right from the beginning, without formal diagnosis. She had been tested so many times over the past twenty years with no helpful results that she could not bear to go through the humiliation again. The tutor promised to teach her to read, without fail, from the first session. The appointment was kept.

The first session was in Edith's kitchen, as were most of them for the next six years. The first session was on April 29, 1971 and lasted over an hour. Edith talked about how she had been taught to read in the past, visual memory of Dick and Jane was all she had ever experienced. The tutor then explained how Edith would learn to read with the Language-Experience Approach and the

VAK method word learning.* Tracing would be used if necessary. Edith chose to dictate a letter to her Grandmother, the person who most cared that she learn. She dictated a simple letter of a few sentences with correct grammar. The tutor printed it. Then she read it, learning fifteen words in the process. She had no great difficulty learning the words by writing them from memory as she said them by syllables. Her home work was to review the vocabulary, copy the letter and send it. There were tears in her eyes as she read the letter perfectly for the first time without difficulty. She had learned: something, Amelia, imagine, you've busy, wish, could, help, with, cleaning, getting, married, standing, making, wedding.

At the session, a week later, she knew all the words learned in a flash presentation and could read them in a new paragraph. She was on her way.

At the third session phonics was introduced. It was apparent she did not know the consonant D and its sounds. A confusion of "b" and "d" had persisted through the years. In accordance with the principles of learning, only one element was to be learned at a time. The third session emphasized the sound of d with its visual element. The more than half a dozen examples from her words learned were used for visual and auditory reinforcement. Phonics was taught throughout as it applied to her word learning and reading needs. A practical approach dictated work throughout the sessions.

---

*The VAK approach to word learning is one that incorporates visual, auditory and kinesthetic reinforcement of words learned.

After a half a year of successful reading tutoring Edith went from total illiteracy to primary level, functioning, basic skills. It was obvious the two would have to be integrated. Reading and spelling began to be treated distinctly separate and word analysis skills tied more into spelling than reading.

In September of 1972 she was reading (SRI)*:

Independent	3^1
Instructional	3^2
Frustration	4

Then the flood gates began to open. She wanted more to talk about her past and attempt to understand and integrate her life, than to learn. Business failure, marriage failure, and pressure from within to understand her past resulted in a complete mental breakdown by '75-'76. There was a plateau in learning for 3 years. Tutoring and counseling went on sporadically, but with consistent weekly contact. Successive summers her story was taped for posterity.

In September of 1976 she was reading (SRI):

Independent	3^2
Instructional	4,5
Frustration	6
Listening level	7+

A set-back in mental health winter '76-'77 resulted in an emphasis on life style rather than reading skills again, and referral to a social worker. In the summer of 1977 she seemed to rise to her life situation with renewed strength and success.

A complete diagnosis in 1977 showed up her her high level of

*Standard Reading Inventory by Robert McCracken, Klamath Press.

intelligence (110 IQ on a WAIS*) and "Dyslectic" tendencies. It also proved that she has basic, if not totally illiteracy.

She now considers herself functionally literate in her daily living. She is a housewife, conscientious mother of an elementary school age boy, and a part time school cook and fancy baker. She can "read" the newspaper, letters, follow cookbook, figure out labels as a consumer, and read school notices -- all with a modicum of assistance. Her fluent reading is restricted to materials of high-interest, low vocabulary levels. Her writing is still not spontaneous. She spells with great effort and very inadequately. However, she feels adequate to her life tasks now as never before. She handles her life well. Maybe the difference between illiteracy and basic literacy is greatest in its psychological ramifications.

EDITH'S ORAL HISTORY

Edith's life story was told by Edith to her tutor successive summers from 1974 to 1977. By the nature of oral history, these transcribed tapes give us some appreciation of Edith's linguistic capabilities compared to her understanding of people and life around her. Through this oral history we gain insights into the social causation of illiteracy and the psychological experience of growing up illiterate. The transcribed tapes have been edited to eliminate duplication and to answer the following questions:

1. What does she remember of her pre-school years and what

*Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale: Performance IQ 114
Verbal IQ 106

language experiences does she remember?

2. What does she remember of the primary grades with emphasis on reading?

3. When did she realize she was different: in school and in the community? How did this affect her psychologically?

4. What does she remember of the intermediate grades with special emphasis on reading? Did she have any reading help or other special help in or outside of school?

5. What was her relationship with friends, grades 4 - 9, from her perspective?

6. When and how did she learn of her illegitimacy and how did this affect her relationships?

7. What does she feel about her family's attitude toward her as a child and what was her attitude toward her family as a child? How have they changed, from her perception?

8. How did she break from her family and support herself?

9. How did she earn money and how did her illiteracy affect her job possibilities and experiences?

10. What was the impact of her illiteracy upon her social life with the opposite sex, early dating, choice of a mate, and marital history?

11. What is the impact of her illiteracy upon her handling of her own child after his birth?

12. What is her attitude toward life and literacy now that she can read?

The full dissertation includes 221 pages of taped, typed, oral history which is dramatic reading and seems to provide the answers to the twelve questions as follows.

1. Edith's pre-school years can be divided into Ohio and Michigan years. When her mother married Ellis C____ they moved to Ohio to live. Edith's mother, Netta, was apparently deprived both physically and psychologically in her own pre-school years and grew up mildly retarded, not the best mother to stimulate language and cognitive development in her own child. As parents Ellis and Netta apparently left much to be desired and Edith's maternal grandmother became the dominant influence in her pre-school and primary years. Occasional visits to the farm in Michigan were the high spots of her earliest recollections and when she was six her family moved to the farm. Her grandmother, Aunt Amelia, and cousin Louise tried to dress, groom and prep her for first grade, but the whole experience was over-whelming and she was obviously not ready to profit from first grade at all. There were no reading experiences in those years at all. No one read to her and she saw no one read.

2. In the first grade Edith was obviously not ready to learn to read and apparently not even aware of failure. She learned nothing toward literacy. In the second grade at the same school she again learned nothing, but this time illnesses and consequent absences contributed. When she repeated second grade at the new school in P____ she was probably too disturbed because of her family situation to care much about schooling. Her grandfather had died, the farm was broken up, and Edith's mother and father took her away. In P____ she was treated as a servant in her own home. It wasn't until third and fourth grades that she was aware of failure in school and began to be concerned. This was the beginning of being told, "Do the best you can." Large class size

was always the reason given by teachers for inability to give her individual attention, and there were apparently no services available.

3. When she began to see that the others were learning in school and she was not, she was also realizing her inferior position socially in the larger family and in the community. She became a drudge. There was little diversion or joy in her life, no enriching experiences. Her only friend was more a benefactress.

4. During the intermediate grades she was well aware of failure and her inferiority and subordination. She was "passed" on and praised only for being "good", or submissive. She received no special help for her obvious reading-spelling difficulty and, in fact, was given the same text books as the rest of the class in all subject areas. "Bad vibrations" further interfered with her capacity to learn.

5. Friends, grades 4-9, were outside of school and centered largely around church with the exception of Louise, who became more and more distant. She concealed her inability to read and write as much as possible. She discovered she got along better with adults than children of her own age.

6. She learned of her illegitimacy bluntly as a pre-adolescent and gradually learned that the family and community were ashamed of her and expected the worst of her. This all intensified her lonliness and feelings of inferiority.

7. Now she realizes that her family rejected her by and large when she was young. Grandma, Uncle Mortie and Aunt Helen were the notable exceptions. She constantly sought after approval and learning experiences but experienced repeated failure and

restrictions. In recent years she has won them all over and they feel her to be superior to the household of her mother and step-father. Her aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and cousins all accept her as a respected family member now.

8. She left home because she found more room and acceptance in the home where she had been baby-sitting. Leaving home involved quitting school at the end of the ninth grade and becoming a domestic.

9. She remained a domestic five years, then went out into the working world only by leaving Michigan again. In the city she found difficulties in applying for jobs and was restricted to the most menial positions because of her lack of skills, strong feelings of inferiority and lack of worldliness.

10. Her illiteracy and related feelings of rejections and inferiority restricted her social life with the opposite sex in school and later to fleeting crushes. It was not until she met an older man who was attractive and attracted to her that she had a close male friend. Only gradually, through involvement in his domestic crises, she came to know her present husband. She was terribly fearful of losing him. As he has involved her in domestic crises of her own, repeating the rejections of her youth, she has had her mental breakdown. They are working through personal problems as she attempts to irradicate her illiteracy and strengthen her ego.

11. Edith was fearful her own child would be deformed or retarded because of her strong feelings about her own academic weaknesses and inferiority. She sought and found help in bringing him up. Her greatest desires are invested in him and her initial

breakdown was in part precipitated by anxiety over him having the reading problem and school failure she did. However, she has been an excellent mother in every respect, grown enormously, and Bobby has become a very successful young student and a confident young man.

12. Edith's self-concept now is of a literate woman. Her attitude toward literacy is still one of awe; her sights are high, but becoming realistic. She seems to have taken a new lease on life, includes herself among the adults of this world, and fully expects to continue to grow and learn.

This oral history has not only answered our questions, but dramatically illustrated how an intelligent person can be beaten down to accepting a position in "special ed" and dropping out of school and the mainstream of society. Her use of language amuses us throughout and is constantly in contrast to the thoughts expressed. The pervading theme throughout this oral history is the psychological impact of reading disability. Working with an adult illiterate consequently should include counseling to be successful.

FINDINGS

Through observation and letters and interviews with friends, relatives and teachers in Michigan Edith's story was corroberated. What caused Edith's total illiteracy? Many factors conspired to create an illiterate adult with an unmined capacity to learn.

Firstly, perceptual weakness (both visual and auditory)

probably is congenital in this large, inter-related family. Below the surface of family unity is resentment that the beginning reading skills were not reinforced at home, as would have been necessary for these children in this area at that time. That time refers to the thirties when Edith's mother and uncles were in a country school and the fifties when Edith was in school. Others in the family had these beginning difficulties and overcame them with home drill as Edith did as an adult.

Secondly, the school system provided no special services and a poor quality of education reflecting the expectations of the community. The whole area represents Harrington's "insular poverty", but the poverty is largely cultural poverty today. Provincialism is total and teachers not from the area leave after a year or two. The attitude toward education and learning in the area reinforces the school's low quality. They have a county newspaper which is concerned with local news. Sports seems to be the main concern in relation to the schools. Little reading or writing is expected in the schools. The homes have no books or magazines, only the bible.

This is an oral culture. Conversation is in and about families, with fierce family loyalty preventing criticism and correction of weaknesses. Long drawn out tales of personal experiences are the main entertainment, reinforced by family pictures with recollections of tales from previous times. Book-learning is remote. One infers reading ability is not valued, certainly reading is not.

Thirdly, Edith's immediate family is everyone's out-cast. They are the lowest on any social ladder, town or family. Lack

of appearances and cleanliness seem to be the major and most consistant complaints. Poverty has been their lot through the years. Within this family Edith was the oldest, a girl, and illegitimate.

Before she left the farm her home environment was largely adults and she was Grandpa's spunky "little sugar". After she left the farm all segments of society conspired to destroy her self-confidence. Although her initial difficulties were undoubtedly from perceptual weakness and retarded language development, social and psychological factors undoubtedly became the final and strongest inhibition.

Those who cared were powerless to act in such an overwhelming situation. Social reinforcement of her inferiority was daily living for her. Only by leaving the whole area, family and community as well as school could she have a chance. When she did leave she had the effects of illiteracy to contend with. Her husband was "dumbfounded" when he realized her total illiteracy. He found that because of her extreme gullibility "people put everything over on her. She was being used for lack of knowledge." Now she is struggling to remake her whole ego structure.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The total life reinforcement of inferiority is the result of illiteracy. This is not only an education problem, it is a social and moral one. It becomes a moral and social obligation to provide equal educational opportunity for all in a democracy. How is

the next question. The whole fabric of society is involved.

What we need to eradicate this situation is first a concentration on reading treatment rather than an emphasis on reading disability. Through individualized diagnostic-prescriptive attention everyone can learn to read and write to some level. This is the major area of responsibility of our schools. Secondly, teachers and other educators must be made sensitive to the devastating psychological effect of reading disability and illiteracy. It should be no surprise to an educated educator that Edith's IQ on a WISC was 80 at the end of seven years of elementary school (and constant defeat in school, at home, and in the community) and 110 on a WAIS after learning to read as an adult.

More effort must be made to educate educators, right down to the classroom teacher, and in every rural and inner city school. The effect of teacher opinion and teaching skill cannot be underestimated. Every effort must be made to eradicate illiteracy, in adults as well as children. Understanding and communication may be the key.

Certainly adult illiterates need counseling concomitant with reading instruction. Reading therapy is the key to those we do not reach the first time around. The psychological effects of illiteracy are deep and strong and profoundly influenced by social factors. The social and moral responsibility for illiteracy in our society today rests with all of us.

LIMITATIONS

1. Fifteen years have elapsed since Edith dropped out of school, a functional illiterate. Approximately ten years have passed since she left her family. This passage of time may have interfered with accurate and complete collection of data.

2. Complete collection of data was not possible because of inaccessability of teachers and family through death and mobility to other areas of the country.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. This type of study should be replicated using subjects from different backgrounds and considering different psychological and sociological factors.

2. Further studies should examine the impact of labeling (i.e. Special Ed., Minimal Brain Dysfunction, Learning Disability) upon the ego development of the individual.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Formuth, John. "Reading Literacy: Its Definition and Assessment." Reading Research Quaterly 9, 1 (1973-74): 7-66.

Brown, Don A., and Newman, Anabel P. "Research in Adult Literacy." Journal of Reading Behavior 2 (1970): 19-46.

Cottle, Thomas J. Black Children, White Dreams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

Cottle, Thomas J. The Voices of School: Educational Issues Through Personal Accounts. Boston: Little Brown, 1973.

Dollard, John. Criteria for the Life History. New York: Peter Smith, 1949.

Entwisle, Doris R., and Webster, Murray J. "Expectations in Mixed Racial Groups." Sociology of Education 47 (1974): 301-318.

Entwisle, Doris R., and Webster, Murray J. "Raising Children's Performance Expectations: A Classroom Demonstration." Social Science Research 1 (1972): 147-158.

Entwisle, Doris R. and Webster, Murray J. "Research Notes: Status Factors in Expectation Raising." Sociology of Education 46 (Winter 1973): 115-126.

Fox, John J. "Oral History: Window to the Past." Paper presented at the Northeast Regional Social Studies Conference, Boston, April 1976.

Hall, Mary Anne. Teaching Reading as a Language Experience. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1976.

Harman, David. "Illiteracy: An Overview." Harvard Educational Review 40, 2 (May 1970): 226-239.

Kavale, Kenneth, and Lindsey, Jimmy D. "Adult Basic Education: Has it Worked?" Journal of Reading 20, 5 (Feb. 1977): 368-376.

Miller, George A., ed. Linguistic Communication: Perspectives for Research. (Report of the Study Group on Linguistic Communication to the National Institute of Education) Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1973.

Moss, William W. Oral History Program Manual. New York: Praeger, 1974.

Newton, Eunice Shared. "Androgogy: Understanding the Adult as a Learner." Journal of Reading 20, 5 (Feb. 1977): 361-363.

Peck, Cynthia Van Norden, and Kling, Martin. "Adult Literacy in the Seventies: Its Definition and Measurement." Journal of Reading 20, 8 (May 1977): 677-682.

Powell, William R. "Levels of Literacy." Journal of Reading 20, 6 (March 1977): 488-492.

Rist, Ray C. "Student Social Class and Teacher Expectation: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education." Harvard Educational Review 40 (1970): 411-451.

Rosengarten, Theodore. All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

Seitz, Victoria. Social Class and Ethnic Group Differences in Learning to Read. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1977.

Stein, Annie. "Strategies for Failure." Harvard Educational Review 41 (1971): 158-204.

Sticht, Thomas G. et al. "Project REALISTIC: Determination of Adult Functional Literacy Skill Levels." Reading Research Quaterly 7, 3 (Spring 1972): 424-465.